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AUTHOR Allen, Sheilah M.
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ABSTRACT

An action research project in Canada set up a penpal program between preservice teachers and middle school children. Its purpose was to promote the literacy development of the younger students and to provide the preservice students with an understanding of adolescents. Although the first year was especially successful and rewarding--the highlights being visits between correspondents, one at the middle school and one at the university--the second year was less exciting. Still, while abroad in Sydney, Australia, on leave, the researcher realized she was not ready to give up the idea, and put herself in connection with teachers and university professors who were interested in a penpal exchange between Canadian and Australian students. A seventh-grade class in Australia is doing a research project on their country and preparing to send texts such as colored brochures to their peers in Canada. They are very enthusiastic about this, completely on task in the library using CD ROMs, encyclopedias, and books. This appears to be an example of real writing for real purposes with an authentic audience. (Appendixes contain information sheets for students to fill out and a reading interest survey sheet.) (TB)

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PROJECT PENPAL: An international writing exchange via electronic mail between adolescent students

A few years ago, a Master's student in Language Arts and I decided we wanted to maintain the link we had established during her year of full-time graduate studies. She taught at a local middle school and I in a Faculty of Education. Surely, we thought, some form of action research would be possible. I had ordered a videotape of a joint school/university letter writing project which took place in Western Australia (Latham & Morriss, 1993). Their project involved preservice elementary teachers and primary grade children writing letters back and forth, culminating in a visit by the university students to the school to meet their penpals. This provided us with the answer: my undergraduate class, preservice English teachers, would exchange letters with her grade 8 class. The purpose was to promote the literacy development of her students and to provide mine with an understanding of adolescents.

During the first year, 1993-94, I was very involved with both classes as I taught or team taught the grade 8's once a week. I'd go to my university class able to talk about what I had done, some of which worked and some didn't. But I'm getting ahead of myself in omitting a crucial feature of the project, the matching of students with their penpals. I designed an interest inventory (see Appendix A) which both classes filled out. On the basis of apparent similarities, I paired students up. My class wrote the first letter, followed by letters every second week. I read all the letters, copying those which seemed interesting, different, or revealing. I learned so much about my students through their letters (eg. one man had a sister who went to the Olympics at Barcelona) as well as about the grade 8's (eg. a girl whose Dad worked in a different city and whose brother had died of cancer). I enjoyed the grade 8's more than the teacher did (they were a cast of characters that I didn't have to live with the rest of the week). I've written about them elsewhere (see References), talked about them at a conference in Australia, and come to feel very fond of them.

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Two of the highlights of the project were the visits to the school by my students and to the university by the grade 8's. At the end of the eight months of letter exchanges, the end of the university year, I asked both classes to reflect in writing on what the letters had meant to them (it was clear to me that despite the claims in the literature about literacy growth in other people's projects no such

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change had occurred in mine). The value instead had been to create some friendships, to share ideas sometimes between generations, to gain insights into someone else's point of view.

The project in its second year was quite different for a number of reasons: I had two small classes instead of one who participated, I had a graduate assistant who photocopied all the letters so I didn't read them consistently, my teaching schedule was such that I couldn't teach the grade 8's and so I didn't get to know them as well. The teacher liked them better than the previous class, but I found them bland by comparison. The matching was based on a revised inventory and I also asked for data from the grade 8's on their reading habits and writing (see Appendix B an. I'm in the process now of rereading all their letters and writing about my insights. Suffice to say that I felt less involved with the grade 8's and less keen about one of my classes. We exchanged visits, they wrote that they had enjoyed and learned from the experience, but I felt they were less committed than the previous students.

This year, 1996-97, I'm on study leave and thus have no classes. But I wasn't prepared to let the project go so when I was in Sydney at a conference, I connected with several people--teachers and university professors--who were interested in an international penpal exchange, that is, Canadian students writing to Australian students and vice versa via electronic mail. So far, the end of November, the local grade 7 class has completed an inventory and written two groups letter to a class in New South Wales, receiving one back. We began with a group letter because, given the different school year Down Under (summer holidays in December and January) we weren't sure which students would be back in February to write to penpals here. The problems with email have been daunting, but messages sent and received!

The grade 7's are doing a research project on Australia, preparing to send texts such as colored brochures to their peers. They are very enthusiastic about this, completely on task in the library using CD ROMs, encyclopedias and books. The most popular topic is Aussie animals, but a whole range is being researched. Their teacher told me that she has to restrict working on the project to one day a week because given a choice they'd do nothing else. This seems to be an example of real writing for real purposes with an authentic audience. Projects like this abound both in North America and around the world due to the technology at our disposal. We

need to take advantage of students' commitment to such an activity as it is helping them develop skills, communicative as well as technical, which will serve them well in the next century.

REFERENCES

Latham, G. & Morriss, M. (1993). Penpals: A gift of writing. Melbourne: Ian Shiel Communication Services.

Appendix A

Data About You

_____
Name

Directions
Please answer the following questions by circling or filling in the blank.

Gender Male Female

I. Background

1. Where were you born? _____

2. Do you/your parents speak another language? Yes No
If yes, what language? _____

3, Have you travelled? Yes No If yes, where?_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Are you religious? Yes No

5. Do you have any pets? Yes No
If yes, what kind? _____

6. Do you think of yourself as a reader? Yes No If yes, what do you like to read? _____

_____

_____

_____

7. Do you think of yourself as a writer? Yes No If yes, what do you write?_____

_____

_____

II. Interests

1. Do you play sports? Yes No If yes, which ones? _____

_____

_____

2. Do you enjoy music? Yes No If yes, what kinds?

_____

_____

3. Do you enjoy movies? Yes No What are some of your favorites?

_____

_____

4. What T.V. shows do you like to watch?_____

_____

5. Do you watch Star Trek Yes No

Star Trek The Next Generation Yes No

Star Trek Deep Space Nine Yes No

Do you have favorite characters? _____

6. Are you concerned about the environment? Yes No

Do you care about the Clayoquot? Yes No

7. Would you rather write to: a woman _____

a man _____

either is O.K. _____

Appendix B

WHO AM I AS A READER? _____
Name

DIRECTIONS: Please fill in the blanks OR circle OR ✓

1. Something I find hard to read is _____

2. Something I find easy to read is _____

3. I like to read such things as _____

4. I dislike reading such things as _____

5. I read newspapers A Lot Sometimes Never

6. I read comics A Lot Sometimes Never
My favorite comic is_____

7. I read magazines A Lot Sometimes Never
My favorite magazine is _____

8. I like to read stories about:
_____ horror, _____ fantasy, _____ adventure, _____science fiction, _____ animals, _____ romance, _____ sports, _____ families, _____ humour, _____ other (example, _____)

9. I like to read true accounts about:
_____ war, _____ people's lives, _____ animals, _____ how to make/do books, _____ travel books, _____ books about hobbies, _____ other (example, _____)

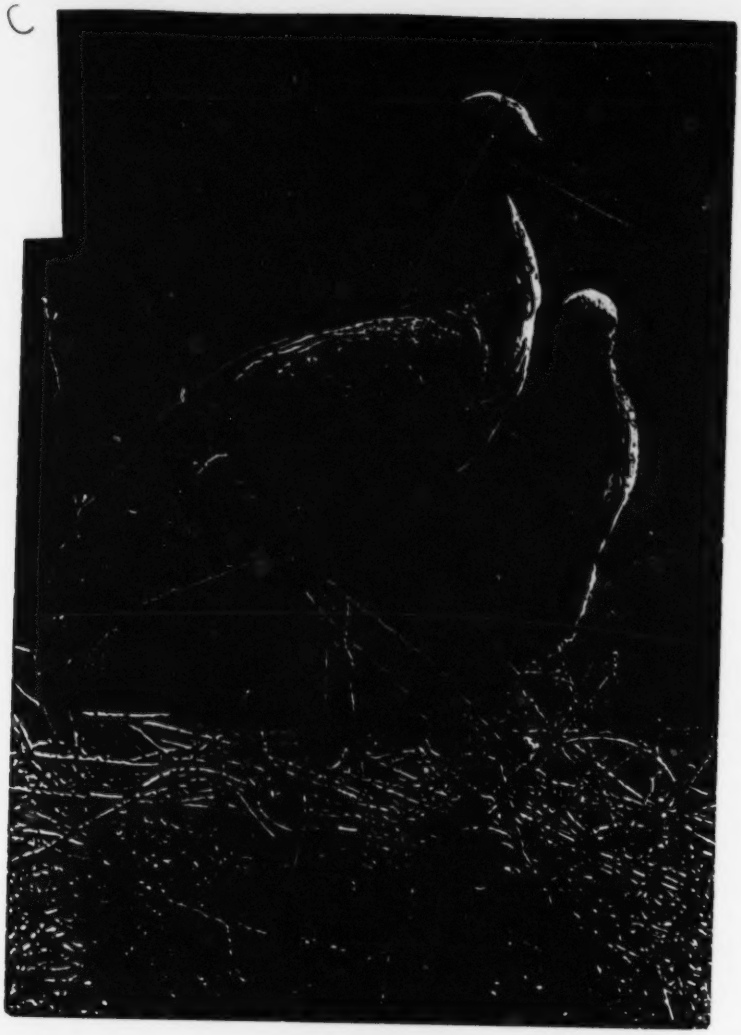
10. Something I read in school that I liked was _____

11. Something I read when I was a kid that I enjoyed was_____

12. Some useful things to read are: T V Guide, recipes, schedules, directions for making or building things, newspapers, other (example, _____)

PS Something important about me which has nothing to do with reading is _____

Appendix C



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